

alternative

FRANCE FOR THE FAMILY

by Martin Crocker Photos by Beverley Crocker



▲ Father with children (two-year old daughter strapped to the cliff).

Forced to work? Family person too? Need to get away climbing? Conscience getting in the way? Fear not, oh stressed one, help is at hand: holidaying in northwest France, *en famille*, could be for you.

It's sometimes the hardest thing on earth to balance the irreconcilable demands of family life and climbing. Many climbers don't even bother to try (shackling a partner in a harness doesn't count). But a family holiday with climbing kit in northwest France is the nearest you may come to a compromise. No need for deception, bribery or Brownie-point diplomacy here, in northwest France everything for the family will be within 30 minutes reach (provided the climber in the family chooses the location).

There are the glorious beaches of Brittany and Normandy for the kids, rivers and chateaux of the Loire for the partner and all

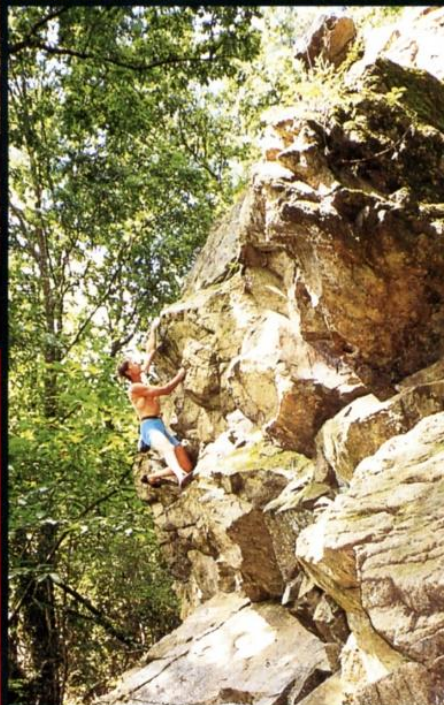
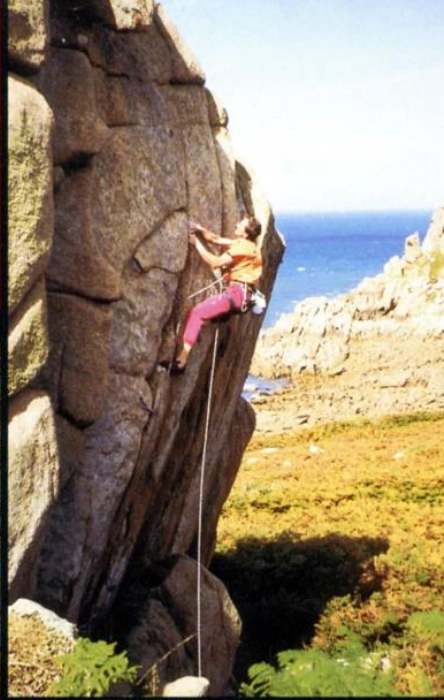
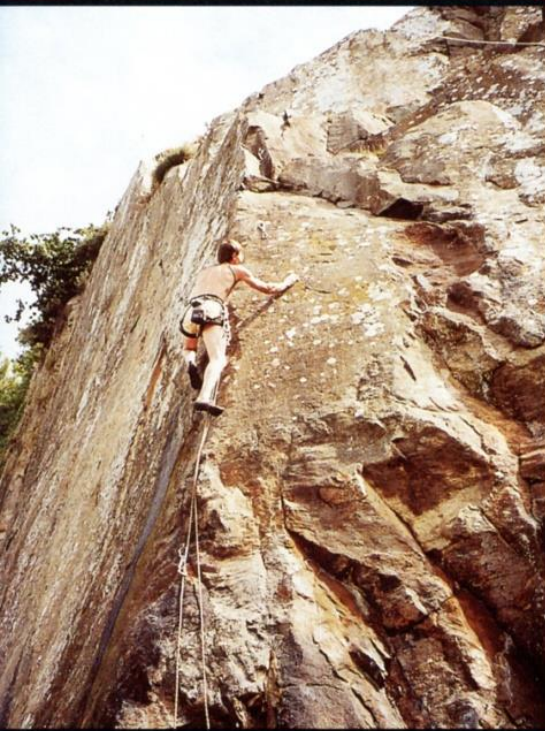
manner of sea cliffs, granite warts, quartzite globules, volcanic plugs, and honeycombed limestone sheets for you. Some of the rock is bolted, some has pegs, some is above deep water. There's tons of bouldering and some of the stuff you'll do will be first ascents. But above all you'll find peace and quiet on the rock.

It's taken me nine successive years to eke out around 50 climbing sites, usually without any substantive information to hand. By French standards these crags are not popular, let alone celebrated, climbing venues. Tracking down guidebooks and topos can readily eat into holiday-time — where they exist at all. This article may help in your explorations. It is a summary of the more attractive locations, with enough information to whet the appetite and to get you to the crags faster than I got to them.



◀ Superb granite bouldering near Perros Guirec, Brittany.

▼ Martin with Soloist on 'Le droit fil' 6b+, Mont Dol, Brittany.



▲ Martin soloing 'Le pecher' V+ at the delightful granite crags of Les Rocheurs du Cousenon, Brittany.

Each is accompanied by a Family Rating (FR) which rates the suitability of the attractions and facilities in the immediate area for families from 1 (highly unsuitable) to 5 (highly suitable) and a Buggyability Rating (BR) which rates the ease and safety of getting the kids to the crags from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good) and a Partner Rating (PR) which rates the chances of coming across a possible partner at the crag from 1 (you're on your own) to 5 (everybody will want to climb with you) note: you'll need to perfect your sign language if you can't speak French.

All are within easy access of plentiful supplies of *pains au chocolat* and *vins de cheapo*. Should you want more information, then persuade a UK publisher to sponsor a guidebook, or write to me with appropriate donations.

BRITTANY

Mont Dol

A granite-slab oasis in a Mont St Michel-seeking tourist hotspot. Drive right up to the foot of these well-bolted and well-managed, granite crags that are situated within easy striking distance of St Malo etc. Just aim for the 200ft granite hump south of Mont St Michel. Eighty mainly steep face routes up to 21m, with more being put up as we speak. Fine routes in most grades, including a good choice of routes for your kids and some sterner 6c-7b stuff.

FR=5; BR=5; PR=4

Les Rocheurs du Cousenon (20kms west of Fougeres)

Dewerstone-ambience, well-bolted granite crags in a pleasant riverside setting. One of Brittany's principal inland crags and the vil-

lagers are proud of it (a societal model for the BMC to adopt perhaps). Loads of scope for lower grade climbers, with most routes 4a-6b (but hardest routes 6c). Don't miss out on *la dalle noire* (5+) and *les narines* (6b). Eighty routes in total, most around 15-18m. Good soloing. Guidebook available at local bar in Mezieres.

FR=5; BR=5; PR=5

(There is more rock nearby, notably the charming quartzite boulder-land of Les Blocs du Blaireau.)

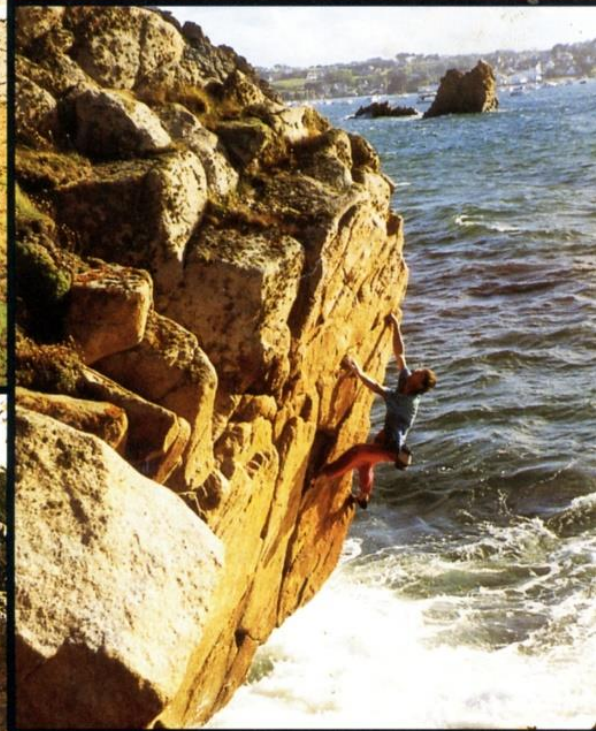
Rochers du Saut Roland (15kms south of Fougeres)

A local beauty spot. Folklore tells of St Roland who, on horseback, made wild jumps from the huge quartzite 'icebergs' across to the other side of the valley. His third jump failed. Here you'll find nice, well-bolted crags in a wooded valley, with a diversity of routes up to 7b. Some mean leaning stuff and humbling grades throughout (6c can mean E4 6a). Way-marked trails and leisure lake five miles south.

FR=4; BR=3; PR=2

◀ Martin deploying the Soloist on 'Sekoua Bomba' 6b, Premel Tregastel, Brittany.

▼ Martin soloing 'La Batail des Boinettes' 6a+, Premel Tregastel, above a none-too-deep sea.



St Just (50kms southwest of Rennes)

Perfectly sited volcanic-breccia cliffs right next to the edge of a (non-swimming) lake; stunning environment. Well-bolted with about 40 short routes up to 6b. Nice place to start your kids climbing. Good soloing. Open and quick-drying.

FR=4; BR=5; PR=1

Elle aux Pies (65kms southwest of Rennes)

I tracked this down from a picture in a local tourist board brochure, but (like most other inland Bretagne crags) it now features in the area guidebook. Another beautifully located riverside series of cliffs, with 70 well-bolted routes on granite up to 22m. Can be popular, meaning that some routes can feel polished in the heat. Not that easy to get a buggy across to some cliffs (one rises above the river) but we managed. Local stuffed dinosaur park for the kids (and daddy).

FR=3; BR=2; PR=4

Pen Hir, Le Cube, l'imperatrice

These cliffs, near Brest, are better-known and information more readily accessible. Note that the traditional climbing ground of Pen Hir, a 50m sea cliff, has been fully retrobolted with stainless steel staples, but that these became subject to a user-warning (check out CAF Brest website for latest position). Good deep water soloing in places.

Premel-Tregastel (Finistere)

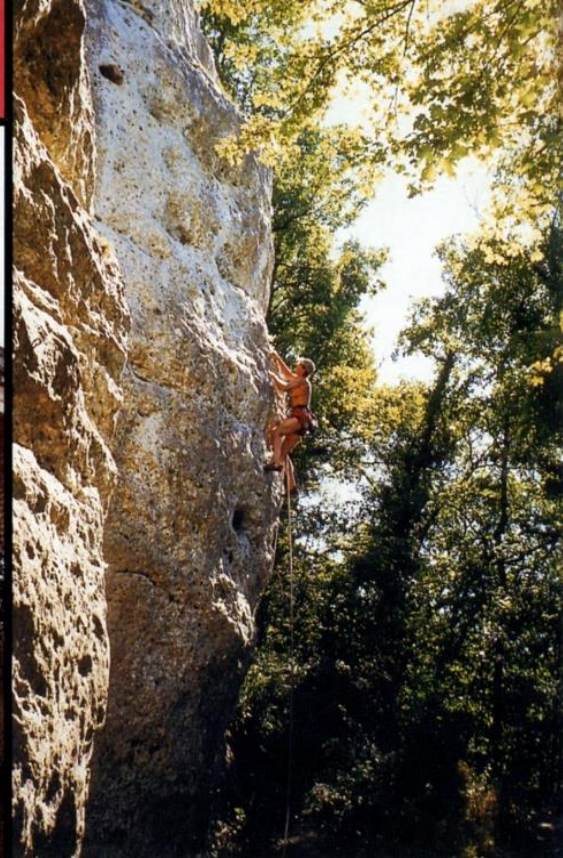
A mysterious area, with tons of seaside granite of West Penwith character. The main crags on the Pointe are almost fully bolted, as is Le Likon, a high tide stack two kilometres to the



▲ Martin soloing 'Supranatie' 6b, at Chiron de L'Ane, Loire Atlantique.



▲ Man-made climbing out of doors. The author enjoying a 6b+ on Le Viaduc de Cluis, Loire.



▲ The author, with Soloist, climbing 'La Naiade' one of many excellent pocketed 6bs on Rocher St-Berthome, Rives, Loire.

west, at Diben. Maybe 100 routes in total, together with superb bouldering and unbolted crags to explore and to use nuts on — if you must. I have soloed all of the routes on Le Lion at high tide, completing the experience with a miscalculated Tyrolean (i.e. I ended up sagging into the sea and had to swim for it). A full weekend's worth of climbing and very close to the ferry port of Roscoff. Beaches galore. Cool surf set.

FR=5; BR=1/5 (scramble required to Pointe, which is very slightly tidal); PR=1/2

Ploumanac'h (Pink Granite Coast)

Close to Perros Guirec (a favourite resort with Brits, therefore worth avoiding), this is a stunning arena of bizarrely shaped granite blocks, most with names. Lots of bouldering and naturally protected/top-roping possibilities, but the main event is the immaculate deep water soloing on Pointe de Squewel. Tie up your boots and chalk bag in waterproof bags, then (to the bewilderment of the tourists) swim out across the tidal channel and cruise all of the 6b-7a+ routes. Your kids can do the collection for you. There's also a savage 5.13 part-bolted crack on La Roche du Diables nearby (providing a seven-year old shoulder injury to remember it by). Nearer Perros Guirec are some isolated granite tors, with bouldering and four amiable bolt routes (5+6c) below the Sphinx Hotel. There are hundreds of other granite blobs all along the Finistere coast; get out and explore.

FR=5; BR=5; PR=1

NORMANDY

La Fosse-Arthur (10kms northeast of Domfront)

Arguably Suisse-Normandie's best quartzite crag, with 170 well-bolted routes in an upland setting. Most routes are sub-6a and steep slab routes of between eight to 15m abound (good

for soloing but the landings are rocky). Easy to get away from the tourists, except on the track-side crag where the hardest routes are (up to 7a).

FR=3; BR=3; PR=2/3

Mortain

A crag-rimmed valley with a fine 18m pinnacle (L'Aiguillette) centre stage. Quartzite and well-bolted with about 90 routes (though some of the harder crags are re-vegetating). Superb family appeal; there's an attractive picnic site right next to the pinnacle. You'll need a partner, or self-belay device to get to the top of the pinnacle which has a clutch of pumpy E3s.

FR=5; BR=5; PR=2

La Brèche au Diable (adjacent to Potigny-St-Quentin)

More quartzite in another Dartmoor-like leafy dell. This is an attractive place and a good stop-off, since it's only five minutes off the main route south (N158), 20 minutes south of Caen. Approximately 70 routes on five main crags, typically in the lower grades, though with a good selection of 'mid-Extremes' and recent bouldering circuits. Fully bolted. Care is required with access now, best not to approach from the tomb since you may have an irate Angliophobe screaming at you.

FR=3; BR=1; PR=1

Clecy (40kms southwest of Caen)

And now for something... This is a very steep volcanic crag with 80 routes that feel hard for their grades. Lots of absorbing (and fiery) 6a-6c routes and some easier classics, all well-positioned high above the village of Clecy. But look out for Brits. Don't miss out on *Les Grands Surplomb* (6b) and *La Pagode* (6a). Local topo available.

A few miles away are some largely unbolted crags ('Terrains d'Aventure' by French

standards), with an impressive schist pinnacle that can be summited by one of three routes (4b-6c).

FR=4; BR=1; PR=4

Rochers des Ham (12kms south of St Loy)

Minor but a magnificently situated beauty spot on a bluff overlooking River Vire. Two small, bolted slate quarries, that are like a cross between South East Wales sandstone and North Devon culm. Hot and arid ('Attention les Vipères'), with some loose rock for added appeal. Seven routes up to 6b+, together with a handful of novice slab routes in front of the picnic tables.

FR=4; BR=5 (but watch the loose rock in the main quarry and the snakes); PR=1

Montmartin-sur-Mer (20kms north of Granville)

A polished limestone quarry of low-grade, bolted routes, useful if you're staying near Granville. The French seemed to like it.

FR=4; BR=5; PR=3

LOIRE AND LOIRE ATLANTIQUE

Pierre Becherelle (10kms southwest of Angers)

The most idiosyncratic crag in France? This 18m volcanic plug rises tooth-like from the flood banks of the Loire. Ten popular, bolted routes up to 7a optimize every available square centimetre of rock. It is possible for 'the wife' to belay from the car whilst reading to the kids (or vice versa).

FR=5; BR=5; PR=5

Vallée de L'Argenton (40kms southwest of Saumur)

A collection of modest, south-facing well-bolted granite outcrops in a charming riverside setting. There are probably 60 routes in total, with the best choice in the 5+ to 6b category. The best climbing is on **Chiron de L'Ane** in the



▲ The author climbing above his car on Pierre Becherelle, Loire.

east, while the most beautiful is **Chiron de Grifferus** (facing the cliff is a sand bank where the river is shallow enough for paddling and cooling down). Access problems to some of the crags have been rumoured in the past, but there was no evidence of these in 1996 (check out CAF Saumur website).

FR=5; BR=5; PR=2

Beauvoir (10 kms northwest of Poitiers) Understandably busy and polished in places,

this is a steep chert-noduled limestone crag not dissimilar to Portland. Nonetheless, of the 100+ climbs, there are a lot of classics in all grades, from easy to 8a. Don't miss out on some of the hard face routes on the La Thi sector; testing on sight country (especially since the French place bolts so that they are clipped while hanging desperately from handholds rather than while standing relaxed on footholds). The cliffs overlook a stream in an attractive valley. They face south; be prepared

to fry in high summer.

FR=4; BR=4; PR=5

Rives, La Dube, Angles-sur-L'Anglin (50 kms east of Poitiers)

Short of the esoteric and neglected chalk cliffs and quarries near Tours (which are more use for growing *champignons* than for climbing), these are the only crags in the Loire — and set in one of its most beautiful parts. The site is of national importance so, suffice to say here, that if working blind finger-pockets on vertical to overhanging limestone is your thing, your tendons will have a ball. Guidebook available in bar in Merigny.

La Vallée de la Creuse (40kms south south-west of Chateauroux)

Gorgeous area with loads to see and do, including frolicking about at the swimming and boating lake of Lac du Chambon. There are two main climbing sites there.

Pont des Piles is a 45m quarried slab with a full day's worth of routes mainly in 5 to 6a range. Very sunny, quick-drying and with the car park underneath. (A novelty not too far away is the Viaduc de Cluis, which has a few well-bolted 'routes' up its towers: maybe your only chance to climb a bolted bridge.)

FR = 5; BR = 5; PR = 1

Le Rocher des Fileuses. Peacefully overlooking the upper reaches of the lake, and facing the ancient castle towers of Crozant, this is the most idyllic setting of any crag I've ever visited. A series of granite towers stretch down to the lake shore and offer 70 routes of grade 4-6c up to 45m long. Mainly bolted, delicious soloing and with new route potential both trad and sport.

FR = 5; BR = 1; PR = 2

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Escalades sur le Gres Americain, La Fosse-Arthur (1991) and *Mortain* (1987) Parc naturel regional Normandie-Maine.

Escalades a Clecy CAF Caen.

Beauvoir (1991) APDA.

Escalades Dans L'Indre (1995) D Fabre; an efficient area topo-guide, which includes Rives, La Dube and La Vallée de la Creuse.

Rock Climbing in France Bill Birkett.

Check out CAF web-sites for latest (and planned) publications.

Brittany Rock article (*High* 34) I Dunn.

The Anglin Valley article (*OTE* 41) I Lucet-Juchault.

Clecy by C Goodey (*High* 218). 